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The Meeple Guild - Table Hockey, a childhood favorite gets serious

Yorkton This Week
JULY 26, 2020 12:01 PM

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When it comes to games fondly remembered from my childhood, now some half century in the rear view mirror, few come close to the excitement and joy generated by table hockey.

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Let's face it for most kids growing up in Canada, especially in the 1960 and '70s hockey was simply part of life.

Hockey Night In Canada was must watch television, especially so in a one, and then two channel world if on a Saskatchewan farm.

And, growing up an only child I spent hours shooting an orange ball, and yes at time a frozen farm animal turd against the barn wall, often under the yard light until called to come in for bed.

Oh, and I'd be remiss not to add the cultural significance of Canada versus Russia in the 1972 Super Series, still the most indelible sports memory I have.

It's no surprise I was a very good boy and asked Santa for a table hockey game. It meant feeding pigs without complaint but when it was under the tree it was worth it.

The game came with metal players for all 12 teams, which was cool, although I was Toronto and Dad was Montreal for most games.

It helped it was a game Dad was willing to play in winter, so it became a favourite.

So, getting a chance to chat with Sal Capizzi recently was rather fun.

Capizzi is president of the Canadian Table Hockey Association (www.canadiantablehockeyassociation.com), and a former member of the board of the *International Table Hockey Federation* (ITHF), so when it comes to the game's sport he's pretty much an expert.

Hailing from Winnipeg Capizzi plays table hockey competitively on a regular basis in season having been instrumental in starting a league in the Manitoba city decades ago.

"We've been playing since 1989. Last year we celebrated our 30th season," he said, adding it started with "my brothers, my cousins, a couple of close friends."

Through the years the roster of players has changed with co-workers and friends coming and going, but on a given night of action there can be 10 to 20 players out, said Capizzi.

"It's an excuse for a group of guys to get together and order pizza," he joked.

Admittedly, the group are generally older players now, with Capizzi saying in Canada the challenge is to get kids interested in table hockey rather than video games.

"It's this (table hockey) versus Fortnite," he said.

In areas of Europe that is less of a challenge, he added. The game there, in countries such as Finland, Russia, the Czech Republic, Estonia and others, has a vibrant community with the ITHF holding tournaments that can attract 150-200 players. Capizzi said the tournament series "is almost the equivalent of tennis or golf," with participants having "a chance to earn points" towards year-end recognition.

There are ITHF events held in Canada too, but nationally the sport/game tends to prosper in clusters, with leagues in various cities.

Capizzi, a physical education instructor by trade, is always trying to get more people involved, in particular youth. He said at the last three schools he has worked at, he has included table hockey in his classes.

To start with table hockey "teaches them about winning and losing" an important lesson that a video game where you can hit a button and get three more lives to go, simply doesn't teach youth.

Table hockey is also great for eye-hand coordination skills, skills Capizzi said transfer to other sports such as badminton, or tennis.

I for one can attest to loving this game as a kid, and if there were a league locally, at 60 I'd still give it a go as they say. It is definitely a game in my top-10 in terms of influencing my love of games, and one I appreciate because practice can make you better, edging table hockey closer to the sport category than most games in my mind.

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